

The Institute

Turning Information into Insight

A partnership among Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine, Johnson College, Keystone College, King's College, Lackawanna College, Luzerne County Community College, Marywood University, Misericordia University, Penn State Scranton, Penn State Wilkes-Barre, The Wright Center for Graduate Medical Education, University of Scranton, and Wilkes University

The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development (The Institute) launched a polling program in 2014. The Institute regularly polls students at its partnering higher education institutions. These polling and survey research services are part of The Institute's menu of services offered to all types of clients.

This 2020 poll assesses students' opinions about public policy issues and civic engagement. Over 2,200 students participated in this poll— from all class years and a variety of majors. Part-time and graduate students are well represented in the data. The poll is distributed online through our academic partners, and the data was collected during September 2020.

The Institute is an applied research and economic consulting organization that fulfills two related priorities— (1) customized client solutions and strategies to facilitate decision-making, and (2) planning that enhances growth, impact, and sustainability for organizations. The Institute also serves a public mission to provide data, analytics, and research to the community at large. This empirical, objective information is intended to drive discussion and innovative solutions that enhance regional quality of life and standard of living.

"There is a lot to learn from the information revealed in this annual poll. For instance, the degree of students' mistrust in others points not only to a gnawing need for greater community cohesiveness – but also to the fact that we must remain mindful of our own trustworthiness."

Greg Cant, Ph.D., President, Wilkes University

Overall, students do not think the United States is moving in the right direction. Their perceptions of Pennsylvania's trajectory, however, are not as clear.

Approximately 14 percent of students believe that the United States is headed in the right direction, while nearly 51 percent believe the country is on the wrong course. Yet another 23 percent indicated feelings that the country's direction is ultimately unchanged, while a final 13 percent are uncertain about the country's direction. The margin between 'right track' and 'wrong track' answers has grown, from a deficit of 18 percentage points in 2018 to 25 in 2019 and 37 in 2020. The deficit in the 2017 poll was 31 percentage points. Students' perceptions of Pennsylvania's direction are considerably less certain, as nearly 38 percent did not register an opinion on the subject. Additionally, 24 percent claim that the Commonwealth's direction is fundamentally unchanged, 20 percent express optimism, and 18 percent have concerns.



Student respondents deemed healthcare policy, the cost of education, jobs and economic development, civil rights issues, and government corruption to be the most important national public policy issues, while policies related to the national debt were rated least important.

Students were asked to evaluate the importance of various public policy issues by assigning a number between 1 ('Not at All important') to 5 ('Very Important'). Based on this scale, the most important public policy issues to regional students are: (1) healthcare policy (4.5); (2) the cost of college education (4.4); (3) jobs and the economy (4.4); (4) equality or civil rights issues (4.4); (5) corruption of government or public officials (4.4); (6) public health (4.4); (7) government efficiency (4.3); (8) criminal justice or police issues (4.3); and (9) other issues related to education (4.2). The bottom tier of issues include (1) the national debt (3.6); (2) immigration (3.8); (3) tax policy (3.8) (4) Social Security (3.9); (5) energy policy (4.0); (6) terrorism and homeland security (4.1); and (7) climate change (4.2).



Very few students trusted any group of people a lot.

Very few of the students trusted any group of people 'a lot.' Over half the students indicated that they at least somewhat trust certain groups of people - except in the cases of strangers and those who do not share their political beliefs.

Trust in the people or groups				
Group of people	A lot	Some-what	A little	Not at all
People in general	3.6%	48.3%	36.2%	11.9%
Your neighbors	16.9%	48.8%	25.3%	9.0%
Your peers and fellow students	20.1%	57.3%	18.8%	3.8%
Strangers	0.9%	13.4%	39.5%	46.2%
People who do not share your political beliefs	2.9%	45.0%	38.1%	14.0%

Students feel reasonably well-informed about current events, crediting the internet, television, and their friends over podcasts or smartphone apps.

Nearly 90 percent of students reported feeling 'very informed' or 'somewhat informed' on current events. Their primary sources include the internet (social media in particular), television (for national news), and word of mouth. Less utilized forms of media include podcasts, smartphone apps, radio, and late night television. These results are largely consistent with those of last year's poll, continuing to suggest that smartphones are still new contenders to the field of media dissemination, while more traditional forms of online content (such as newspaper subscriptions or even social media) remain the prevailing forms of content circulation for students.

"If we want bright and talented individuals to contribute to the region and help us strengthen our communities, we must show them that we are listening. By referring to polls such as these, local leaders can make informed decisions about issues that really matter to students."

Dale Jones, Ph.D., Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer, Penn State Wilkes-Barre

"As educators and leaders of the region's higher education institutions, I believe it is imperative to examine the ongoing need for affordable tuition and career opportunity in the area. According to The Institute's Public Policy and Civic Engagement Poll, these concerns have remained steady over the years."

Marwan A. Wafa, Chancellor
Penn State Scranton



While most students have engaged in some type of political activity least once, the majority of respondents have never participated in a boycott or in-person protest.

Nearly 82 percent of students who responded to the survey have, on at least one occasion, discussed politics or government during class. Over 77 percent have participated in a debate about public issues (in or out of school). Furthermore, approximately 71 percent of students have signed written petitions. Students were also asked about their attendance of local public meetings, such as sessions of city councils, school boards, or county commissions; nearly 48 percent never attended such a meeting.

"One person can make a difference, and everyone should try."

— John F. Kennedy



"Considering the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not surprising to find that health care remains a key area of concern for regional college students. I look forward to monitoring this trend in the future, in hopes that we will meet their expectations for a strong health care workforce, sound health care policy, and infrastructure."

Kathleen Owens, Ph.D. , President, Misericordia University



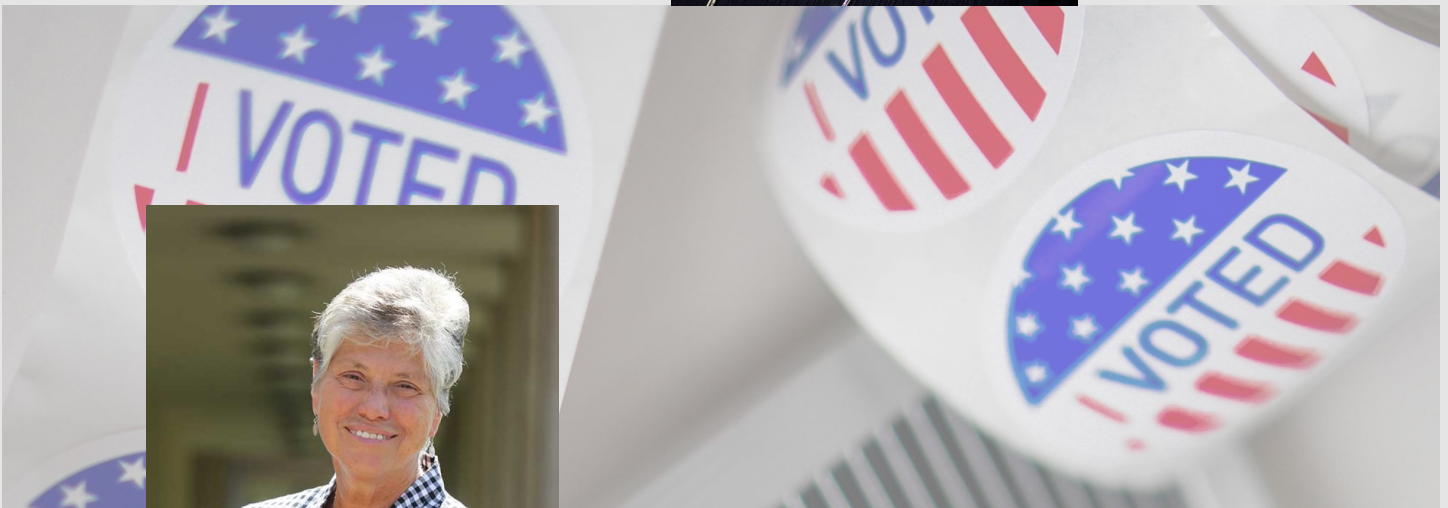
An overwhelming majority of students are registered to vote, and are very likely to vote in the upcoming election.

Eighty-three percent of regional students are registered to vote in any location within the United States, with registration rates rising beyond 86 percent for students over the age of 19. Over 40 percent of students are registered Democrats, followed by Republicans at 26 percent, unaffiliated voters at 22 percent, and members of other parties (Libertarians, Greens, etc.) at three percent. Nearly 87 percent of students are at least somewhat likely to vote in the November 2020 election.



"It is truly refreshing to discover how informed and engaged NEPA's college students are – not to mention their impressive level of commitment to civic duty. They have their proverbial fingers on the pulse of many important local and national issues."

**Jill Murray, Ph.D.,
President,
Lackawanna College**



"The concerns of the young people of Northeast Pennsylvania point to the need for trust, altruism, and inclusion in the structures of society. Their transparent responses challenge those of us who are their leaders, mentors, and employers to demonstrate by our words and actions the potential to change the trajectory of their lived reality. We can be grateful for their authenticity. It should inspire us to work with them to find the future they deserve, one that serves the common good and promotes justice for all."

Sister Mary Persico, IHM, Ed.D., President, Marywood University

Members of the regional student population who are likeliest to vote are generally well-informed, and concerned about the direction of the United States.

Among student respondents, 90 percent of Democrats and 87 percent of Republicans self-identify as 'very likely' to vote in the upcoming elections. Roughly 93 percent of students most likely to vote are at least somewhat informed about current affairs. They also believe, by more than a 2-1 margin, that the United States is currently on the wrong track, and are most concerned about: (1) healthcare; (2) the cost of college education; (3) jobs and the economy; (4) corruption of government or public officials; (5) public health; and (6) equality and civil rights issues.

Public Policy Issues over Time

While the full range of public policy issues presented in this course of this survey has expanded from year to year, the overwhelming majority of issues evaluated by students have been featured regularly enough to analyze over a longer-term period. These issues include: (1) the cost of a college education; (2) issues related to education other than the cost of college; (3) healthcare; (4) jobs and the economy; (5) terrorism and homeland security; (6) environmental issues; (7) energy policy; (8) immigration policy; (9) Social Security; (10) taxes, and (11) government efficiency.

Students appear to be most concerned about four public policy issues: (1) the cost of a college education; (2) healthcare policy; (3) environmental issues; and (4) jobs and economy. In particular, the costs of college education and healthcare have been top public policy issues for regional students since this poll commenced in 2015. Public policy issues whose importance appears to be on the decline for regional students include (1) jobs and the economy (from 63 to 51 percent); (2) terrorism (50 to 41 percent); and (3) taxes (34 to 24 percent).

Students Describing Public Policy Issues as 'Very Important'						
National Public Policy Issue	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Cost of College	66%	59%	63%	66%	61%	60%
Education	45%	44%	42%	45%	45%	45%
Healthcare	55%	52%	55%	58%	61%	63%
Jobs and Economy	63%	55%	55%	54%	52%	51%
Terrorism	50%	50%	50%	45%	46%	41%
Environmental	35%	34%	42%	43%	55%	51%
Energy	32%	28%	32%	33%	40%	35%
Immigration	26%	26%	28%	28%	33%	32%
Social Security	36%	29%	31%	33%	32%	31%
Taxes	34%	25%	28%	26%	30%	24%
Efficiency of Government	50%	45%	44%	42%	44%	46%

Media Dissemination

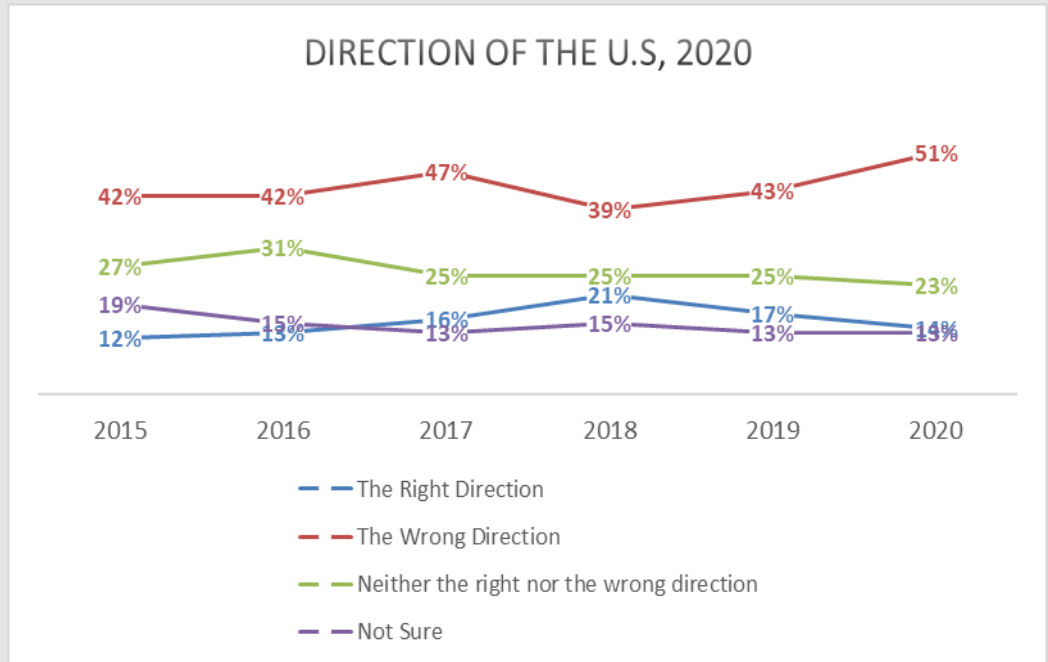
Reliance on traditional media conduits, whether by print (newspaper), television, or radio, has generally declined since 2016. The use of social media, on the other hand, has become an important resource for students. Additionally, in closely-knit student communities, word of mouth remains a potent method by which students receive news and information.

Source of Information About Current Events					
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Newspaper	43%	31%	35%	32%	33%
Television	75%	61%	59%	56%	41%
Radio	36%	31%	32%	31%	26%
Internet (blog or website)	79%	64%	47%	48%	48%
Internet (social media)	72%	60%	70%	70%	73%
Internet (other)	28%	24%	44%	39%	43%
Word of mouth	63%	53%	57%	55%	56%

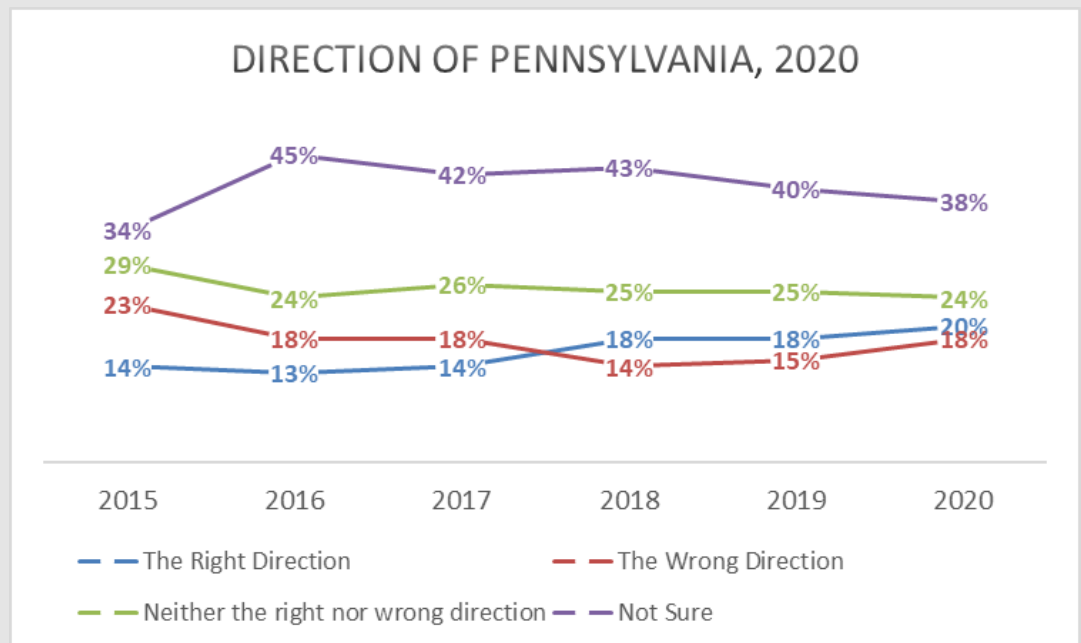
In 2018, for the first time in the Public Policy and Civic Engagement Poll, the wider range of resource options were provided to respondents, in an attempt to more fully capture the diverse methods by which today's students acquire news and information. These methods include smartphone applications and podcasts. When comparing these results to those of previous years, however, these new categories must be reintegrated back into larger categories, which explains the pronounced jump in the number of students who receive news from 'Internet – Other' between 2017 and 2018.

Direction of the United States and Pennsylvania

Every Public Policy and Civic Engagement poll conducted thus far has asked respondents to indicate in what direction (if any) both the United States and Pennsylvania were heading. Although the percentages of students selecting any given option have fluctuated over time, some broader patterns still emerge. First, among students polled about the direction of the United States, a rising percentage of students feel the country is headed in the wrong direction, from 42 percent in 2015 to 51 percent in 2020—although that number dipped to a low of 39 percent in 2018. Furthermore, the percentages of students who are unsure or ambivalent has remained relatively steady since 2017.



Long-term trends are more easily observable among students polled about the direction of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In every poll conducted since 2015, the plurality of students have been uncertain about the trajectory of Pennsylvania's direction, suggesting a possible disengagement from state-level politics as opposed to national developments. Among students who have more fully formed opinions of current events in Pennsylvania, however, other observable trends emerge. For example, the number of students claiming Pennsylvania is heading in the wrong direction has declined from 23 percent in 2015 to 18 percent in 2020, with a drop to its lowest point of 14 percent in 2018. The percentage of students more optimistic about Pennsylvania's direction has increased from 14 percent to 20 percent in the same period.

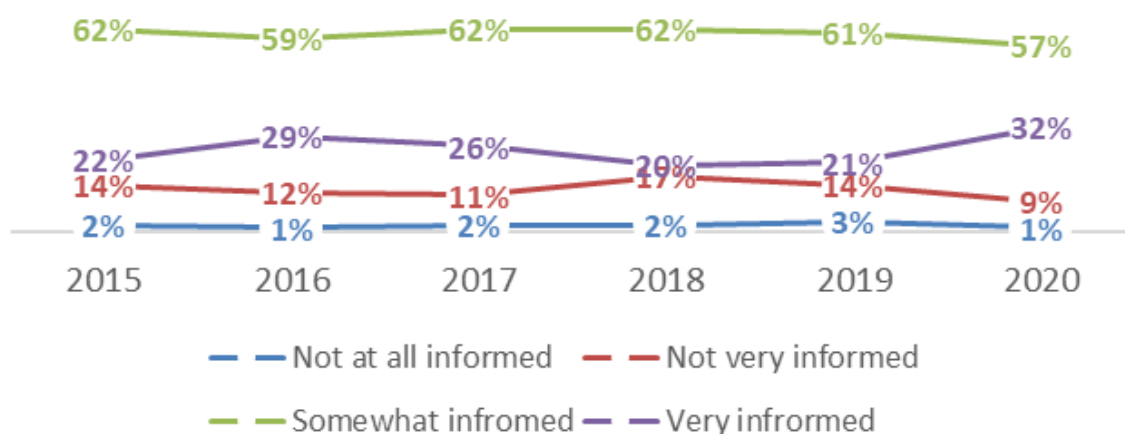


Knowledge of Current Events

Since 2015, respondents' levels of information about current events has remained relatively steady. Most notably, however, the number of students who feel very informed about the news has risen ten percent, as has the number who feel somewhat informed declined five percent. The proportion of students who claim to feel 'not very informed' also decreased five percentage points in the last five years, while the percentage of students feeling completely uninformed has been static. Finally, while 2016 is the only other presidential election year in which The Institute has conducted this poll, overall levels of student current events awareness did noticeably increase during this year. Thus, one interesting trend that might emerge in future iterations of this poll may indicate higher levels of student awareness about current events in presidential election years.



STUDENT LEVEL OF INFORMATION 2020



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What We Believe

At The Institute, we believe that empowering leaders with the research-based strategies and solutions they need to make informed decisions will lead to a stronger economy and a better quality of life for regional residents. For over a decade, The Institute has worked behind the scenes to support initiatives that advance regional competitiveness and revitalize communities.

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